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ABSTRACT

This article provides school council members in Texas public schools engaged in site-based decision-making (SBDM) with information about creating successful preschool programs for language minority children (LMC). It is intended to help the councils make decisions as to how they can: (1) ensure that language minority children have access equal to that of language majority children to a high quality preschool program, (2) create a vision of a high quality preschool program for LMC, and (3) determine the critical steps needed for making that vision a reality. Components necessary for an effective preschool program for language minority students are listed, and criteria for program development and improvement are presented, addressing: (1) policy; (2) administrative structure; (3) program goals; (4) assessment procedures; (5) curriculum; (6) learning facilitation formats; (7) cultural component; (8) language development; (9) site arrangement; (10) instructional ratios; (11) staffing, staff qualifications, and credentials; (12) family involvement; (13) staff development and (14) program evaluation. "An Early Childhood Education Programs Needs Assessment Form" is appended. (MDM)

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THE CHALLENGE FOR SITE-BASED DECISION MAKING COUNCILS:
Making Quality Preschool Education Accessible to Language Minority Students

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ED 369 545

Site-based decision making (SBDM) campus councils are faced with a major challenge: renew faith in education by guiding the restructuring of a dysfunctional system which has problems adapting to and keeping up with the needs of a rapidly evolving and changing society. It is a well-known fact that this system continues to shortchange many students–Hispanics, African American, Native Americans, and other ethnic groups who very soon will constitute a significant part of the population in this country, and in some states, the majority of the population. Recent statistics indicate that although some progress can be detected in the numbers of minority students graduating and entering post secondary institutions, the small rate of growth is proof that the system is far from meeting the goals of eradicating the barriers to equity and excellence in education for all Americans. One group that has been targeted to receive funds and resources is the public preschool student. This article provides SBDM council members with critical information about creating successful preschool programs for language minority children (LMC), particularly the information needed to make three major decisions regarding the implementation of effective preschool programs. These decisions are:

1. How can the SBDM councils ensure LMC have equal access

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to quality preschool programs?

2. How can SBDM councils create a vision of a quality preschool program for LMC?
3. What are the critical steps for making the vision a reality?

Preschool education is one of the latest innovations considered by our educational system to address the neglect and underachievement of LMC students. This innovation is being perceived as an integral part of public education and is rapidly becoming institutionalized in the system. Although this strategy is relatively recent, it has already been victimized by the traditional forces that dominate and guide existing educational practices. In other words, preschool has become routinized as "just another grade level" in the existing system. The trend has been to drop the kindergarten curriculum down one age level, a tactic that has had very limited or no success on preschool's original goal of early acquisition of the English language. Not only does this approach inhibit the normal acquisition of the students' home language which is crucial in the efficient acquisition of a second language, it appears to delay the children's social, emotional, and psychological development (Wong-Fillmore, 1988; Nissani, 1990).

Decision #1: How can the SBDM councils ensure that LMC have equal access to a quality preschool program?

Vast inequities for the LMC student exist in two areas. Kagan (1989) states that "there are vast inequities regarding children's eligibility and access to programs. Children are segregated by income, with limited choices and resources for low income families" (p. 434). The second area is in the quality of existing preschool programs at the public schools. The National Commission on Children recommended in their report *Beyond Rhetoric - A New American Agenda for Children and Families* (1991)

> ...that all children from the prenatal period through the first years of life, receive the care and support they need to enter school ready to learn–namely, good health care, nurturing environments, and experiences that enhance their environment.

In light of so ambitious a goal and the recommendation of such a prestigious blue ribbon commission stands the reality of the circumstances of children in general, and minority children in particular. The reality is that:

- Approximately 40,000 babies die before their first birthday in the United States and black babies are twice as likely as white babies to die.
- The United States is twenty-first in comparison to other industrialized nations regarding infant mortality.
- No progress has been made in the 1980s in the U.S. in reducing the numbers of low-birth-weight babies. For blacks, the rate has increased.
- While only 70% of children in the general U.S. population are immunized against common childhood diseases, only 50% of inner city children are immunized.
- An estimated 12 million American children, mostly poor, are at risk of lead poisoning and hundreds of thousands have their intellectual growth stunted because of lead exposure.
- One in four infants are born to a woman who receives no prenatal care; most of these women being black, Hispanic, poor, very young (teenage), and/or poorly educated.
- The number of children experiencing hunger range from 2 million to 5.5 million; increases in this figure are closely related to childhood poverty.
- 21% of all children in the United States live in poverty; in Texas 23%; in San Antonio 29%.
- Nationally, Head Start funds serve one in six eligible children; in Texas no more than 15-20% of eligible children are served; in Bexar County only 12% of eligible children receive Head Start services.
- Only 3% of eligible children in Bexar County receive child care funded by the Texas Department of Human Services.
- While 73% of children in families with incomes above $25,000 attend a preschool program by age 4, no more than 33% of children in families with incomes less than $15,000 attend a preschool program.

A recent study released by the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 1992) illustrates the inadequacy of preschool programs for the limited-English-proficient student. This study consisted of a statewide survey of districts and campuses, a case study of ten schools, and a longitudinal study of 2000 students enrolled in preschool during the 1989-90 school year.

The following findings describe the major inadequacies of preschool programs in Texas, particularly for the limited-English-proficient students:

- Prekindergarten programs were not grounded in sound philosophical principles and were generally based on misconceptions about learning at this early age.
- The state has failed to provide a framework for Early Childhood Education (ECE) that is grounded in sound philosophical principles.
- Preschool teachers did not receive adequate training about these sound principles, nor did they receive assistance on implementing developmentally appropriate practices.
- Classrooms, for the most part, had an adult/child ratio of 1:22 which far exceeded the recommended practice of a ratio of 1:8.
- Limited-English-proficient children were placed on a fast track to learn English, but very little attention was paid to developing a strong foundation in their native language.
- School districts failed to develop partnerships with parents; consequently, parents, although supportive of the program, were involved in few and, at times, insignificant ways.

The verdict is in. Minority students face educational programs that are based on a student and family-deficit model, one that does not value cultural and linguistic differences and appears to disregard or belittle experiences that an LMC may bring. It is imperative that action be initiated immediately before preschool programs begin to disempower students now at an even earlier age than the kindergarten and first grade levels (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Bredekamp, 1989).

This information has definite implications for SBDM. First, council members must evaluate their existing preschool programs. A negative response to any of the following questions requires immediate SBDM action:

1. Do all students have access to a preschool program?

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2. Does the program value cultural and linguistic differences?
3. Is the program based on sound theory and practice applicable to LMC student needs?

Secondly, council members must form a task force of early childhood educators, bilingual education experts, parents, and administrators to provide a vision and design a preschool program that promises to enrich and empower students.

Decision #2: How can SBDM councils create a vision of a quality preschool program for LMC?

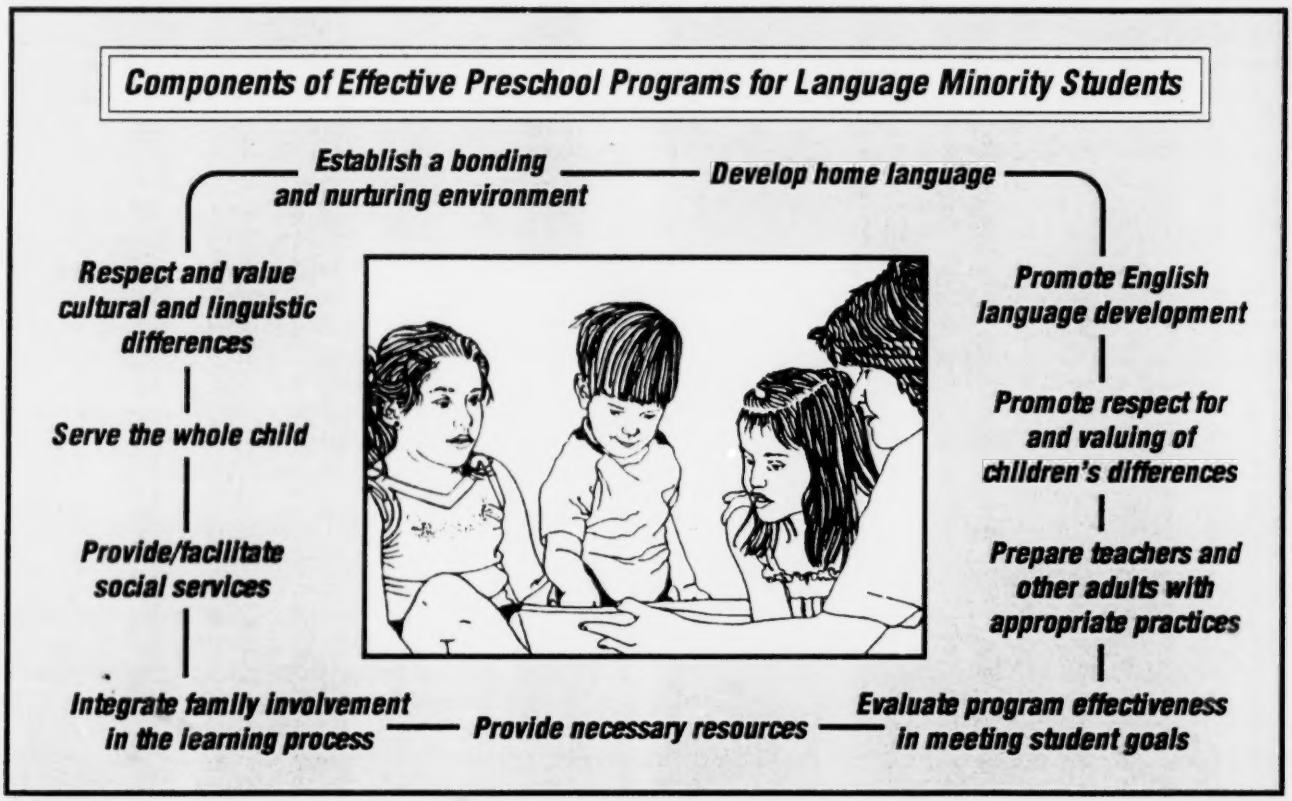
A national search for ways of addressing the failure of public schools in meeting the educational needs of minority and low income students is focusing more and more on the establishment of preschool education as a means of giving all children an opportunity to begin sharing and learning at a young age. Such an early childhood program must have the following goals:

- To establish a bonding relationship with the child's family that creates a level of trust that is crucial in the learning process;
- To establish and nurture an interdependency between the school and the family based on mutual respect;
- To bring about a greater degree of social competence in children whose home language is other than English and in other minority children of low-income families;
- To bring about a greater degree of linguistic competence in the child's primary language, creating a strong foundation upon which to build competence in the English language;
- To enrich children's experiential and conceptual backgrounds in order to prepare them for a more structured academic curriculum; and
- To access those social services crucial to the development of the whole child.

The graphic below provides the components necessary for an effective preschool program. These principles have been generated from numerous studies of effective early childhood education (Bowman, 1989; Edwards & Gandini, 1989; Wong-Willmore, 1989). These principles include the following:

1. Bilingual children with full control of their native language tend to acquire a second language better and faster;
2. Children who develop in a nurturing environment tend to feel good about themselves and do better in school;
3. An effective program serves the whole child by addressing his/her social emotional, physical, and cognitive developmental needs within the context of the family and community;
4. Educational practices that respect and recognize the role of family differences and choices in the individual child's development are more successful in reaching the majority of the children served by ECE programs;
5. Families are an integral part of the program and must play a crucial role in educational process of their children; an ECE program must incorporate the family and home culture into activities (Robledo Montecel, 1993);
6. The worth of each child's family must be validated, thus promoting healthy self-concepts;
7. The preschool program validates and builds upon the culture and strengths of the child and the family;
8. A relationship between the school and the parent must be based on respect for the values of the parent's culture, its

CHALLENGE - *continued on page 12*


Components of Effective Preschool Programs for Language Minority Students
Establish a bonding and nurturing environment
Develop home language
Respect and value cultural and linguistic differences
Promote English language development
Serve the whole child
Promote respect for and valuing of children's differences
Provide/facilitate social services
Prepare teachers and other adults with appropriate practices
Integrate family involvement in the learning process
Provide necessary resources
Evaluate program effectiveness in meeting student goals

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goals for socialization, beliefs about the nature of the child, and accepted child rearing techniques;

9. The program must promote multicultural education and must avoid segregation of children according to family income, race, or national origin;
10. Staff and volunteers in the program must speak children's home language(s) and some must reflect their cultural backgrounds;
11. Program administrators must recognize the value of staff development and provide ongoing staff training on the emotional, intellectual, and physical development of children;
12. Instructional activities must provide activities and experiences that build on each child's strengths; and
13. Program staff must be prepared to provide consistent access to social services.

Another major responsibility of SBDM councils is to articulate a vision for an effective preschool program. This vision must be articulated and presented to a task force assigned to expand on the vision by providing a series of steps and activities to turn this vision into reality. The vision may be a statement of principles to guide the revision or the development of a preschool program.

Decision #3: What are the critical steps for making the vision a reality?

This section addresses the major forces impacting the quality of preschool programs for LMC children, particularly limited-English-proficient children. Criteria for improving the quality of existing preschool programs are listed under each of the major forces.

Policy

- At the local level, a Task Force representative of the major stakeholders in effective preschool programs (school district officials, parents, social service agencies, bilingual educators, teachers) must develop a joint policy statement providing direction for quality preschool services.

Administrative Structure

- At the school district level, a Program Coordinator position should be created and a qualified individual hired to act as a liason between the various early childhood agencies (public schools, Head Start, Title XX, social services agencies) and exert leadership through effective advocacy for ECE programs and coordination with professional organizations.
- Task Force members should act as advisors to the Program Coordinator.

Program Goals

- A set of goals focusing on developmentally appropriate activities must be adopted by the school district's Board of Education.
- These goals must be articulated and given highest priority in the public education system.
- These goals should provide direction for the development of a preschool curriculum framework.

Assessment Procedures

- A multiple approach to assessing language proficiency in both the native language and English using teacher observation and parent interviews should be adopted.
- Developmental screening instruments to identify children's individual growth and development should be utilized.
- Informal assessment measures to keep track of children's progress should also be identified and utilized.

Curriculum

- Criteria for selecting developmentally appropriate curriculum materials should be identified and implemented.
- A list of appropriate curriculum materials should be provided to all ECE administrators and staff members.

Learning Facilitation Formats

- Programs must include both large and small group activities and opportunities for individual exploration on a daily basis.
- Programs should organize instructional activities according to themes or units to facilitate learning. Play should be considered a key learning tool.
- Programs should offer both teacher-initiated and child-initiated activities on a daily basis.

Cultural Component

- Classrooms should include artifacts and objects representative of the children's culture in the learning environment.
- Class schedules should include cultural events and celebrations in the learning activities planned for children.

Language Development

- Teachers must create a language-rich environment in which both the native language and English are promoted.
- Teachers must create a print-rich environment in which students see print in both the native language and English.
- Staff should use storytelling and other oral language activities profusely.

Site Arrangement

- The room environment should allow for children's free movement, with areas designed for individual work as well as small and large group activities.
- The room environment should be conducive to both quiet and active learning activities.
- The room environment should contain developmentally appropriate learning centers and manipulatives that promote concepts and skills development.
- Preschool classrooms should be physically separated from the regular school classrooms.

Instructional Ratios

- No more than 22 children should be in one classroom.
- The adult/child ratio should never exceed 1:15.

Staffing

- Each classroom should have a trained teacher.
- A paraprofessional should be assigned to each classroom unit with more than fifteen students.

Staff Qualifications and Credentials

- Degreed teachers should have a kindergarten or early child-

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hood endorsement.

- Day-care teachers should possess, at a minimum, a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential.
- Teachers working with limited-English-proficient children should know the culture and language of the LEP children.
- Teachers should be bilingual/bi-literate in the two languages of the child (García, 1991).

Family Involvement

- Staff should have regular contact with parents.
- Parents should be invited to participate in the classroom.
- Parents should be provided with opportunities to attend workshops and/or conferences that allow them to acquire knowledge and skills to assist their children in the educational process.
- Parents should be included in advisory and decision-making committees.

Staff Development

- All staff should receive a minimum of 24 staff development hours related to early childhood education per year, with at least 16 hours specifically related to their job function.

Program Evaluation

- Each program should report impact data (number of children served, staff development hours, parent contact hours, etc.) to a state coordinating office.
- Each program should report children's identified needs and how the program addresses them.
- Each program should report the number of eligible children in their service area that they are unable to serve.
- The Coordinator with the assistance of the Task Force should identify child care needs (in terms of times of day services are required, length of time services are needed, kinds of services needed while in care such as dental health, psychological, etc.) and determine the per child cost of providing comprehensive, quality child care services.

SBDM councils may use the needs assessment self-test form at right to determine the degree to which existing programs meet the criteria presented. This information should be collected and used as the basis for initiating action as part of campus improvement plan.

Conclusion

The challenge which preschool education for LMC poses to SBDM councils is both pressing and real. Recent statistics in Texas show that minority populations are on the rise. Hispanics will constitute 47% of the school age population by the year 2026. Furthermore, almost 94% of these children need special help in mastering the English language, a requisite step for successfully completing virtually every curriculum. It is critical to Texas' future that these children obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for productive lives in the 21st century. SBDM councils have the responsibility to gather all the pertinent data needed to make the best, informed decisions and create a quality educational program for *all* students.

In summary, SBDM council members "...need to counteract the prevailing view that language minority families suffer from deficits of one type or another" (Nissani, 1990).

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RESOURCES ON RESTRUCTURING

Additional Readings and Information

The new outlook at the state level is to clear the path for campus-based initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for all students.

- Lionel R. Meno
Commissioner of Education
Resource Guide on SBDM

Wasn't that what happened to Lot's wife? A loyalty to old things, a fear of the new, a fear to change, to look ahead?

- Toni Cade Bambara
in The Salt Eaters

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